

# Producing Commodities or Educating Children? Nurturing the Personal Growth of Students in the Face of Standardized Testing

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**Abstract:** Standardized testing is a reality with which all educators must contend. Although the laws enforcing such assessments do so under the premise that students will thereby be assured an equal opportunity for academic success, they overlook a critical point—students are human beings with needs that reach beyond what is measured on a test. In this article, the author examines the impact of standardized testing on the educator's ability to adequately address these needs and questions whether the focus of education has turned to treating children as commodities rather than helping them to develop not only their intellect but also their emotional and social selves.

**Keywords:** academic performance, adolescents, classroom and learning environments, middle school, No Child Left Behind

Shortly before winter recess, the middle school faculty in a small, suburban Connecticut town received a foreboding e-mail from the principal imploring them to aid in controlling what appeared to be the inevitable onset of the madness known as “the approach of the holidays,” so designated by the subject line.

At this point of the school year I write to beseech/beg/plead/entreat/request that you not give in to the HOLIDAY HYSTERIA that oftentimes ensues when young people begin to fixate on the happenings related to the End [sic] of December. We must hold the line. We must dig in . . . I ask that you minimize in all ways anything related

to the forthcoming holiday that is unrelated to the work directly tied to your curriculum. We must hold high academic and social expectations until the last minute of the last hour of the last day before vacation. Now is NOT a good time to relax and have some holiday fun!

Although one may wonder what kind of heartless individual—aside from the Grinch—would communicate such disdain for the holiday season, the statement is less a reflection of the administrator as it is of the current state of education. Academic achievement is now limited to a single measure: the standardized test. As pressure mounts for all students to meet a specific standard on these assessments, more emphasis is placed on the preparation needed to meet this goal at the expense of all else.

In the article “Teaching Themes of Care,” Noddings (2007) suggests that individuals such as the middle school principal are not alone in their apprehension: “Many otherwise reasonable people seem to believe that our educational problems consist largely of low scores on achievement tests” (64). Although narrowing the scope of education in such a way may seemingly simplify the work of teachers and administrators by allowing them to focus on a defined set of skills and standards, it poses a much more vital question: Are we, as educators, producing commodities or educating children?

## The Standardized Testing Dilemma

The principal's concern with the commotion when left unchecked that often surrounds the holiday season

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is a justified apprehension. Chaos does nothing to promote students' academic growth, which has become the primary goal of education in light of federal legislation like Goals 2000 and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Both acts emphasize high academic standards and continual assessment of student progress measured by standardized testing.

However, the problem arises when these assessments are used as virtually the sole indicators of schools' successes and failures. Noddings (2007) describes the resulting dilemma: "Today, even elementary teachers complain that the pressure to produce high test scores inhibits the work they regard as central to their mission: the development of caring and competent people" (69).

Because the stakes have reached disproportionate levels, educators are often forced to abandon all things unrelated to the test and consequently lose sight of what is important: the whole child, who is not simply composed of intellect but is emotional and spiritual as well. Greene (2007) speaks of the broader scope of education and cautions that if not put into perspective, the current preoccupation with academic rigor and standards may be for naught: "The existential contexts of education reach far beyond what is conceived of in Goals 2000. They have to do with the human condition in these often desolate days, and in some ways they make the notions of world-class achievement, benchmarks, and the rest seem superficial and limited, if not absurd" (32).

What good is it if our students are academically successful, yet lack what is necessary to cope with the more difficult life issues they will face and the interpersonal skills needed to coexist in the global economy for which they are ultimately being prepared? By limiting their educational experience to only one facet of their being, we are unable to adequately nurture their personal growth, which is equally important to their success in life.

### Clarifying Educational Goals

Many in education speak of the importance of fostering a sense of community among students and incorporating character education into schools, yet we do not always allow youngsters the opportunity to be children and to share who they are as human beings because of the pressure imposed by standardized testing. Yet, are we not running a greater risk by denying them the opportunity to learn about and from one another as people?

Greene (2007) speaks of how the overwhelming focus on standards and testing has actually served to restrict student growth in terms of how they perceive themselves within the educational context and the types of students they become as a result: "[Students] find themselves described as 'human resources,' rather than as persons who are centers of choice and evalua-

tion . . . [so] perhaps it is no wonder that the dominant mood is one of passive reception" (33). Instead of moving forward with our teaching by helping students to become active agents in their learning, we instead stunt their development by limiting their instruction to content and skills.

The objectives of achieving academic excellence and nurturing the development of knowledgeable and compassionate human beings do not have to be, and should not be, mutually exclusive: "To have as our educational goal the production of caring, competent, loving, and lovable people is not anti-intellectual. Rather, it demonstrates respect for the full range of human talents" (Noddings 2007, 65). Although giving them the best preparation possible is unarguably the responsibility of every educator and administrator, students must feel valued for more than the economic potential that they hold in the global market.

### Achieving the Balance between Intellect and Emotion

Several years ago, the four academic teachers with whom I work in a cluster and I took our seventh graders to a morning activity known as "breakfast club," run by special-needs students. This club not only gave these mildly and severely learning-impaired children the opportunity to interact with their peers, practice social skills, and handle simple money transactions, it also gave the cluster students the opportunity to interact with friends whom they did not regularly see because of scheduling. The children thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to eat breakfast with each other and, dare I say it, their teachers. They were well behaved, knowing that this was a privilege that occurred only twice a month. Time passed quickly, as it often does when people are enjoying themselves, and we remained in the cafeteria for a little longer than usual. The principal at that time became quite concerned when she walked in and saw that we were still there, which she made clear by her question: "How are you going to make up this instructional time?" I quickly did the math, dividing the extra fifteen minutes that we had squandered by the remaining seven academic periods left in the day, yet I, like my colleagues, remained silent. The question was valid, but the answer, once again, depends on how one defines instructional time and educational goals.

School must be about achieving a balance between developing the intellectual, emotional, and social selves of each individual. Allowing children a reasonable amount of time to socialize with one another not only addresses these needs but also aligns with the natural disposition of the human being. "Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on each other for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best, and we need to interweave them in our pedagogical discourse as well" (Palmer 2007, 72).

The time the children spent that morning interacting without a keyboard in front of them or a phone between them may be more valuable than those irretrievable fifteen minutes. Perhaps the time may even have increased the camaraderie between them, thereby enriching ensuing discussions and facilitating the ease and efficiency with which they worked on learning activities within the classroom. The fact is that, on that day at breakfast club, we, as teachers, made a choice. We chose to invest those fifteen minutes of academic time in nurturing the social and emotional development of our students—so that one day they are able to successfully function in society and willing to learn from and listen to people different from themselves because perhaps they have learned standards of humanity in addition to the standards on an assessment.

### Focusing on the Shared Human Experience

Yet, social time alone will not address all of the needs described earlier. Teachers must be encouraged to use the curriculum to not only teach the skills and content necessary to achieve on the test but also to achieve in life. "Teachers can be very special people in the lives of children, and it should be legitimate for them to spend time developing relations of trust, talking with students about problems that are central to their lives, and guiding them toward greater sensitivity and competence across all the domains of care" (Noddings 2007, 69–70). When students are able to see their teachers as people and share in experiences with them that reach beyond skills and standards, they are more receptive to the instruction given in the classroom.

Educators can also use the curriculum to teach tolerance and recognition of those shared experiences that run through all humanity. Greene (2007) suggests that teachers use the arts and literature in a way that transcends their current use as simply tools to teach children those skills assessed on the test. She points out that interaction with the arts not only nurtures a student's journey of self-discovery, but it also promotes a deeper learning.

All of this is directly related to developing what is today described as the active learner, here conceived as one

awakened to pursue meaning. . . . Encounters with the arts nurture and sometimes provoke the growth of individuals who reach out to one another as they seek clearings in their experience and try to live more ardently in the world. (Greene 2007, 37)

Furthermore, by studying literature, students can come to recognize the common threads that run through all human experience, transcending age, race, and religious differences, which will promote tolerance and help them to function in a global society.

### Conclusion

Oftentimes as an educator, I gauge my decision making by considering my own child. When I think of my aspirations for my daughter, I know that, without a doubt, I want her schooling to be rigorous so that she is able to compete against her peers both in this country and internationally; but, more important, I want her to have those experiences that aid in the development of the whole child. I want her education to include memories of games that she played with her friends at recess and the joy associated with the anticipation of the holidays; I want her to remember conversations that she had with her teachers unrelated to math or science. These experiences contribute to a healthy, well-rounded education that helps to develop a healthy, well-rounded child.

In reality, the students whom we teach become our children, and we share these same hopes for them as we do for our own sons and daughters. Although standardized testing will ensure that we do not lose focus of academic excellence, we must be equally cognizant of allowing for opportunities within the educational setting to nurture the personal growth of each child.

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